

1 June 1997



**ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP  
OFFICIAL OPENING OF NEW MANDIR  
MANDIR SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA INC  
CANBERRA**

E&OE.....

Mr Aggarwal, Mrs Kate Carnell, the Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory, Senator Margaret Reid, President of the Senate, Greg Cornwell, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, His Excellency the High Commissioner for India, other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

It is, for me, a particular pleasure to be here and to share with this community a very special day. Today is a magnificent Australian autumn day. I think Canberra is at its absolute best at this time of the year and the absolutely stunning weather that has been turned on today is a tribute to the diverse exhortations, diverse in a religious sense, that have no doubt gone heavenwards in order to deliver such a beautiful day and it has been very successful.

Today, of course, is a celebration not only for the Indian community and those from other countries that are gathered here today but it is also a celebration of some great Australian values. It is a celebration of the tolerance and the openness and the diversity of the Australian community.

It is a celebration of religious freedom.

Today marks a demonstration that in Australia one of the enduring strengths of our society is the right for people to believe what they wish to believe in a spiritual or religious sense and indeed to choose not to believe anything of a spiritual or religious kind.

Australia now, of course, accommodates many religions. It respects the traditions of all religions and it has been a cornerstone of Australian society ever since the foundation of our nation at the turn of the century, it has been a cornerstone of Australian society to respect and to celebrate religious as well as racial and cultural diversity. And today I take the opportunity as Prime Minister of reaffirming the importance of those values, the importance in Australia as we go towards the new millennium, the importance of racial and religious toleration. It is a very, very important and enduring Australian value and one I know to which the overwhelming majority of Australians strongly adhere and strongly aspire.

The Mandir that I will open in a few moments is, of course, quite an ornament for the local community. It will provide a centre not only for the Hindu community and for the Indian, Sri Lankan and Fijian communities of Canberra, but it will also be a very valuable community resource and I congratulate the local organisation on the fact that it will be open to people of all faiths and people of all beliefs and all dispositions.

I want to join Mrs Carnell and others in congratulating the local community on the tremendous work that has been involved, the long years that it has taken to bring today about.

It is not easy for a relatively small community to get together the resources, to get the donations, to get the materials, and to get the support that is necessary to achieve a goal such as is being realised today. And I again remark upon the fact that in doing so, the community has demonstrated another great Australian value and that is the value of self-help and the value of voluntary effort and the value of the local community starting with meagre resources and building upon those resources and bringing about a very important goal.

I also want in a broader sense today to thank the people of the broader Indian community for the contribution that they have made to Australian society. I want to thank them for the cultural enrichment they've brought to Australian society. I want to thank them for the industry, their commitment to spiritual values, their contribution to the small business life of the Australian community.

And I would also like to thank His Excellency the High Commissioner for India for his very kind remarks. I agree with him that relations between India and Australia are very strong indeed and I do hope to have the opportunity very soon to visit India.

India, of course, is the world's largest democracy. It is a remarkable thing that a country as large, a country as ethnically and religiously diverse and a country that was born in such tragic internecine warfare in 1947, that a country of that size should have survived for so long in a democratic state. And it is a tribute to the intrinsic democratic values of Indian society that that should have been the case.

I value the relationship between our two countries very highly indeed and it has been a deliberate act of the foreign policy of the Australian Government over the last 14 months through the activities of myself, the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Fischer and the Foreign Minister, Mr Downer, to upgrade and enhance the relationship between our two countries.

But ladies and gentlemen, today most importantly of all is an occasion for those in the local community to celebrate their own particular values and their own particular beliefs. Today in this very open democratic society of Australia, people of the Hindu faith are honouring their values and their beliefs and they are demonstrating in a quiet and dignified fashion their own spirituality and their own view of the importance of the spiritual side of life. And I respect them for that. I honour them for that and I thank them for the contribution that the spiritualism of Hindus is making to Australian society in the 1990s.

Ladies and Gentlemen, can I, on behalf of the Australian Government, again say to the members of the Indian community and all gathered here today, you are very, very welcome, you are a very honoured part of Australian society. You have brought much to our country. You will contribute much to our country in the years ahead and it is a particular delight for me as Prime Minister of Australia to welcome all of you here today, to honour your contribution to modern Australian society and to officially declare open the Mandir of Canberra.

Thank you.